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ABSTRACT

As a society, we believe that persons affected by a public decision should be represented in the development of that policy. The Family Community Leadership program (FCL), recently launched in Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington, has been established to increase homemakers' understanding of social concerns that influence families, and to increase their skills and participation in dealing with these concerns in the public arena. However, observation indicates that homemakers' involvement in public affairs increases tension within their families. Several studies, i.e, a 1977 study by the Center for American Women and Politics, the evaluation of public affairs leadership development programs in five states (California, Washington, Montana, Michigan, and Pennsylvania), and the Impact Assessment of the Washington Agriculture and Forestry Leadership program, confirm this observation of increased family tension, and indicate a negative influence on future participation in public affairs for homemakers. Further analyses of the data from these surveys indicates that homemakers tend to use two broad strategies for coping with increased family tension: isolation/insulation (keeping the strain from family members), or integration/reintegration (incorporating new demands into the family's life style). These findings have implications for public affairs education in the university extension, whose programs might incorporate, in addition to the traditional foci of public affairs education programs, content and skills that will help participants anticipate intrapersonal and interpersonal growth stress, and that will equip them to help their families adjust to new roles and relationships. (MCF)

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A DILEMMA ABOUT HOMEMAKERS' INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPING PUBLIC POLICIES THAT AFFECT THE FAMILY

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Introduction

Persons affected by a public decision should be represented in the development of that policy. However, voting records, studies of power clusters and surveys of political office holders, show that some segments of our population are under-represented in public decision making. For example, women (51% of our adult population) hold 8% of the local elected positions of mayor, city council member and county commissioner. (6)

An educational experiment--the Family Community Leadership Program--has been launched recently in seven western states to increase the participation of homemakers in those public issues that influence families. Participants, so far, are mostly women.

The seven states in FCL are: Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington. FCL is sponsored by W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Extension Homemakers' Council and Cooperative Extension at the land-grant universities in these seven states.

Three broad goals of FCL are to increase homemakers':

- understanding of social concerns that influence families;
- skills in dealing with these concerns in the public arena; and
- participation on these public issues.

In this exploratory study, I focused on one facet of what I consider a majoy dilemma--how can we, in university extension, support the kind of representative, sustained citizen involvement in public decision making that does not defeat the very goal we pursue in the public arena? More specifically, how can we further enable homemakers to participate in developing public policies that influence the family with a quality of participation that strengthens--not weakens--their families. How can we design means that, indeed, are consistent with our end--a stronger family.

In this paper, I: (1) assert that the dilemma is real for a significant proportion of homemakers who become politically active; (2) describe those participants for whom the problem seems more severe; (3) identify possible sources of the problem; (4) identify a range of strategies that homemakers have used to deal with the problem; and (5) suggest some points for us in university extension to consider in designing public affairs education.

The Dilemma

As a society, we believe in representation when developing legislation. We seek to involve homemakers in developing public policies that influence the family.

But we observe that homemakers' involvement in public affairs increases the strain and tension within their families. A 1977 study by the Center for the American Woman and Politics concluded that about one-half of the women who held elected positions in local governments reported that their political activity was harmful to their family life. Most of the women respondents were married and mothers of children older than 18; 38% of the county commissioners and 56% of the city council members worked outside the home; they devoted 10 to 25 hours per week to their elected office.

These respondents also believed that men's involvement in political activities adversely affected their families.

From another set of studies--the evaluation of public affairs leadership development programs in five states (4 and 8)--we observed that from 18% to 35% of the participants reported increased strain and tension in their families because of their involvement in these programs.

State	Days of Participation	% of participants reporting increased strain and tension in their families because of their involvement in public affairs education
California	30	18
Washington	70	32
Montana	67	32
Michigan	123	31
Pennsylvania	20	20
	30	29
	65	35

Some participants also reported increased strain and tension with other people--their peers and older community leaders (see Attachment A).

Did the strain and tension influence their future participation in public affairs? The Washington report would suggest "yes" for at least some participants.

Ringwood asked Washington participants, most of whom were homemakers, whether they would take part again: 98% of the men but only 70% of the women responded affirmatively. Further, Ringwood asked for the participant's perception of their spouse's stance toward the participant's future involvement in public affairs. Nine percent of the men, but 40% of the women, believed that their spouses would oppose their continued involvement.

In short, from one-fifth to one-half of the homemakers involved in public affairs reported that their political lives strained their family lives; the more intense the public activity, the higher the incidence of family strain. One indicator of family strain--the spouse's opposition to their continued involvement--was inversely related to their preference about continuing.

The dilemma--maintaining a home and at the same time working in the public arena for policies that better support families--is real to many politically active homemakers.

Profile of Participants Who Experienced Increased Family Strain

Let's turn now to a description of those who experienced increased strain and tension in their families. Data come from the four state impact assessment by Howell, et al. (4)

Given the exploratory nature of this study, I've chosen to show simply the percentages of respondents, by demographic characteristic, who reported increased strain in their families.

Characteristic	Total Number	Reporting Increased Family Strain	
		No.	%
1. Marital status			
a. Never married	26	5	19
b. Married	407	117	29
2. Sex			
a. Female	70	28	40
b. Male	395	103	26
3. Level of Education			
a. < College graduation	180	58	32
b. Bachelor's degree	70	13	19
c. College plus	209	59	28
4. Employment			
a. Not employed	25	10	40
b. Employed	433	119	27
1) Part-time	17	3	18
2) Full-time	414	116	28

Characteristic	Total Number	Reporting Increased Family Strain	
		No.	%
5. Family Income, in $000's			
a. < 5	15	6	40
b. 5-10	24	9	37
c. 10-15	80	23	29
d. 15-20	88	26	30
e. 20-30	109	27	25
f. 30 +	144	38	26
6. Residence			
a. Farm	224	65	29
b. Rural, non-farm	72	27	37
c. < 2500	34	5	15
d. 2500-10,000	54	15	28
e. 10,000-100,000	53	11	21
f. 100,000 +	18	3	17
7. Number of Children 18 at Home			
a. 1	66	22	33
b. 2	149	49	33
c. 3	125	27	22
d. 4	31	7	23
e. 5	10	4	40

I find it difficult to generalize across all demographic characteristics. For example, I have yet to see relationships between increased family strain and age. We might expect, however, that the incidence of family strain was higher among women with less than a college education, who were unemployed and received a lower level of income, and who lived in rural non-farm homes with five children!

Correlates of Increased Family Strain and Tension

Studies in Montana (2) and Washington (8) may suggest why some participants experienced increased strain and tension in their families. Here's my summary of participants' written statements in their evaluation of these two public affairs education programs:

- My being away from home so long.
- Forcing my husband to take over household tasks.
- For my husband to assume the domestic load along with his work.

- My husband's jealousy toward the opportunities I was getting.
- Spouse's feeling left out.
- Husband's feeling of being threatened.
- I am less satisfied with the life I had before the program.
- My feeling of independence, self-confidence and self-worth; to be an individual...not because I was someone's wife or mother, but because of my own qualifications.

The few interviews that I've completed this fall with Pullman residents suggested some additional reasons for increased family stress:

- The public and press' curiosity about "What's it like being married to a politician?"
- Criticism of the parent's public position on a community issue expressed toward the parent's children.
- The activist's being expected to or expecting to represent a particular position on an issue for the sake of public debate or representation of other citizens' points of view.

Interestingly, differences of opinion between spouses about the public issues themselves were not mentioned as a source of family stress.

It seemed then that the additional strain and tension attributed to involvement in public affairs was related to: time pressures; role/role conflict; jealousy; threat; personal dissatisfaction with things as they are; a greater sense of self-identity, particularly among women; public curiosity; the public's criticism projected toward children; and an expectation to represent others' points of view.

Strategies

How did these homemakers deal with these sources of strain and tension? Some clues come again from the Montana and Washington studies and my interviews in Pullman.

Participants tended to use one of two broad strategies--isolation/insulation, on one hand, or integration/reintegration, on the other.

Here are some examples of what I identified as a strategy to isolate and insulate the problem:

- A wife wrote that her husband has never allowed her to share the program with him...not wanting to hear about it.
- What ever you do in this position will not affect me, said one husband.

- I just don't talk with others--my colleagues, the press--about relationships with my wife (the mayor).
- I told my children that the harassment they may get is not their problem--it's their mom's thing.

On the other hand, some described techniques that I saw as part of integration/reintegration strategies:

- My children have been able to share with me not only the responsibilities at home but the actual learning process through discussion.
- The children have developed a self-sufficiency in getting meals, handling transportation and solving daily problems.
- My husband has been very supportive and has developed a closer relationship with his children.
- The willingness with which my husband coped with difficulties in my absence led me to a greater appreciation of our relationship.
- The quality of my personal life has improved. I am more willing to work things out with my family in a quiet, friendly way... I now prefer to spend more time with my family.
- I can understand my husband's unspoken feelings of jealousy and being threatened and I sympathize with it. I doubt that I could have been so understanding.
- When my stance on an issue comes up, it becomes a topic for conversation at the dinner table.
- I view my attending weekly meetings as an obligation; it's a way to teach my son a sense of duty.

On one hand, then, some participants isolated the cause of strain and tried to insulate it from others in the family. In contrast, others tried to incorporate the new demands into the family's life style and, perhaps, realign relationships.

Implications for Public Affairs Education

How can we, in university extension, further enable homemakers to participate in public decision making with a quality of participation that at least does not weaken the family or lead to the homemakers' prematurely dropping out of public service?

We might listen more closely to those for whom increased involvement in public affairs did not increase family strain and tension. Perhaps they can suggest some things about timing, pacing, gearing one's level of involvement, reciprocating roles within the family, dealing with feelings of jealousy

and being left out, helping couples deal with "growth stress," networking within extended families, neighborhoods or interest groups...

Maybe we should reconsider whom we invite to take part in public leadership development programs. In families with fathers and mothers, should we select just one spouse, or both? Who would we select for training, for example, in families in which the husband and wife both contribute to family income as on family farms or in family-run businesses and share household tasks? What is each spouse's relative level of margin? Can the available margin be utilized more effectively if, indeed, they team in all three arenas--family, business and public?

Perhaps we can assist groups of homemakers--cooperatives?--in more deliberately assessing each family's margin in order to plan their level of public participation and identify corollary support needs. On the other hand, should we offer some kinds of educational programs specifically for spouses who do not participate in public affairs?

The content emphasis in earlier public affairs education programs has been on: (1) public issues and decision making; (2) personal skills to deal with issues in the public arena; and (3) participation. Perhaps we should give more direct attention, with at least some participants, to content and skills that help participants: (4) anticipate intrapersonal and interpersonal "growth stress" and (5) equip themselves, in turn, to help their families adjust to new roles and relationships. An example of this additional emphasis comes from Pennsylvania; that state's program offered a workshop for participants' families entitled, "Balancing Family and Community Responsibilities."

In short, let's reconsider <u>who</u> we ask to serve as teachers, <u>who</u> we invite to participate in public leadership development programs and <u>what</u> we help homemakers learn in order to further enable their sustained and representative participation in the development of public policies that, in turn, influence families more affirmatively.

ATTACHMENT A

Proportion of Respondents to an Evaluation of Programs in Five States Who Reported Increased Tension and Strain in Their Relationships With Others (4)

State	Duration in years	Days Participation	Percent		
			Older Leaders	Peers	Family
California	2	30	20	17	18
Washington	2	70	18	25	32
Montana	3	67	24	21	32
Michigan	3	123	27	32	31
Pennsylvania	1	20	22	24	20
	2	30	24	22	29
	3	65	33	32	35

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